

November Newsletter Extended Article

Activating Student Voice

by Melissa Shearon

Student comments echo in the minds of teachers on the commute to and from work and shape many lesson adjustments throughout the day. Teachers troubleshoot their students' *"I don't get it's"* with colleagues in hallways and lunchrooms. Student feedback guides instruction and assessment daily in every content and grade level.

Why then, in the context of the Professional Growth and Effectiveness System (PGES), does the Student Voice Survey often elicit a sinking feeling in stomachs, an elevated heart rate, and insecurity in our teachers? With the implementation of PGES, it is crucial for school leadership to collaborate with teachers to ease concern and use the Student Voice Survey as a catalyst for an integrated, authentic approach to student voice.

As a Goal Clarity Coach at Westport Middle School in Jefferson County, I'm keenly aware of the need for intentional, collaborative discussion about the many moving pieces of PGES among administrators and teachers. Administrators strive to ease teacher concern and to make the student voice survey a positive experience for everyone.

Considering the vulnerability that the student voice Survey prompts in teachers, it is especially important for administrators and teachers to collaborate proactively when implementing. Here's what I've learned:

Talk openly and honestly

Teachers have used student voice to guide instructional adjustments for years, yet they often need help identifying the role that student voice plays in their classroom. School administrators can tap into these experiences by holding a forum to discuss student voice. Sharing past experiences using student feedback to improve instruction may encourage teachers to discuss openly any hesitations about the new system. By facilitating conversation where teachers are encouraged to be vulnerable, administrators may elicit trust and pave a path of two-way dialogue for the entire PGES process.

Create a student-teacher-parent voice culture at your school

One official Student Voice Survey per year should not be the only time administrators hear from the stakeholders of their schools. To foster a culture of openness, students, parents and teachers alike should have opportunity throughout the year to give feedback to school administrators. Formative Voice Surveys should be used to inform and reflect. Administrators can model solution-oriented reflection and reaction by highlighting strengths and areas for growth based on surveys and communicating consistently about adjustments they make in their own work based on the feedback.

Teach students about critical feedback

Teachers may have concerns that students will give feedback that doesn't accurately depict the learning outcomes of the class. Critical feedback can be modeled in classrooms through [peer assessment practices](#) and [accountable talk methods](#) in class discussion. Administrators may

support teachers in these classroom practices by empowering teachers to use these practices and share with one another through embedded professional development opportunities.

Assume the best intentions

Presentation is everything when implementing a new system. Administrators may gain teacher's buy-in by being solution-oriented and optimistic, rather than placing blame. Empowering teacher leaders to be advocates for student voice also may help the entire school assume best intentions. Highlighting teachers who model authentic reflection with colleagues may spur a culture of openness and reflection.

Support the survey

Communicating the importance and rationale behind the survey should extend beyond teacher-student conversations. Students in all grade levels deserve to know the purpose of the survey. Administrators can support teachers and the survey by visiting classrooms to discuss the survey's purpose and explaining how the data will be used to improve their school.



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